



SUPPORTING
AN ENABLING ENVIRONMENT
FOR CIVIL SOCIETY

Enabling Environment Snapshot

South Africa

June 2025

Summary (for the website)

South Africa's enabling environment for civil society remains under strain despite strong constitutional protections. The formation of a Government of National Unity (GNU) in 2024 [raised](#) concerns over participation, transparency and civil society engagement. Human rights defenders (HRDs) and whistleblowers have faced harassment, intimidation, reprisals, violence, surveillance and legal threats, while thousands of Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) risk deregistration under the NPO Act. Peaceful protests are frequently met with excessive force and online spaces are increasingly hostile due to infiltration by state and non-state actors. Despite these challenges, civil society continues to play a vital role in advancing social justice, with opportunities emerging through the National Dialogue and global platforms like the G20 and C20 taking place in South Africa in 2025.

Context

In the past year, South Africa's enabling environment for civil society has faced multiple challenges. While democratic institutions remain intact, concerns over respect for fundamental freedoms and for civic freedoms have grown.

A major political turning point occurred during the 2024 [General Election](#) held from 26 to 29 May. For the first time in 30 years, the African National Congress (ANC) lost its parliamentary majority. This led to the formation of a Government of National Unity (GNU), led by President Cyril Ramaphosa, comprising 11 political parties. While some view the GNU as a step toward inclusive governance, others see it as an uncomfortable [compromise](#) due to different ideological political foundations, especially to alliances with right-wing parties like the Democratic Alliance (DA) in the GNU.

May 2024 [saw](#) a surge in service delivery protests, particularly in the Eastern Cape Province. Many communities used the general elections to highlight their frustration with the state's failure to provide basic services such as clean water, employment, electricity and housing. Almost half of these protests were elections-related, with several incidents reported, including attempted disruptions of voting, threats to the Independent Electoral Commission (IEC) officials and damage to election materials.

Under the GNU administration, the country continued to experience a high number of protests and community unrest, particularly around service delivery failures, corruption and economic inequality. Demonstrations have sometimes been met with heavy-handed police responses, raising concerns about the use of excessive force and restrictions on the freedom of peaceful assembly.

Additionally, online civic space has become increasingly [hostile](#), with a rise in digital harassment, perpetrated by state and non-state actors, particularly targeting human rights defenders, journalists, LGBTIQ+ activists and migrant rights advocates. While South Africa did not undergo a change of government or electoral violence in 2025, the growing frustration with governance and socio-economic challenges has led to increased tension and civic mobilisation.

1. Respect and Protection of Fundamental Freedoms

South Africa's civic space is rated as '[Obstructed](#)' according to the CIVICUS Monitor, indicating significant challenges to freedom of association, peaceful assembly and expression. The 1996 [Constitution](#) safeguards fundamental rights to freedom of expression, association and peaceful assembly under Sections 16, 17 and 18 of the Bill of Rights (Chapter 2), which are essential for creating an enabling environment for CSOs. However, over the past year, civic space has been severely impacted by reprisals, violence and intimidation, particularly targeting whistleblowers, journalists and human rights defenders working on land, environment, social justice and LGBTIQ+ rights.

On 15 February 2025, Imam Muhsin Hendricks, a globally known Muslim [LGBTIQ+](#) advocate, was murdered in Gqeberha, Eastern Cape Province, reportedly in a hate crime. On 20 February 2025, Vusi Banda, chairperson of Mondlo Township Civic Organisation was [shot](#) dead shortly after leading protests demanding better service delivery in KwaZulu-Natal Province. On 7 March 2025, Pamela Mabini, a whistleblower and gender activist, was gunned down after [exposing](#) abuse and corruption involving televangelist Timothy Omotoso. Omotoso, [acquitted](#) in April 2025 due to grave prosecutorial errors, faced sexual assault and human trafficking charges. He voluntarily opted to be deported following his [re-arrest](#) on immigration charges.

Freedom of peaceful assembly is [regulated](#) by the Regulation of Public Gatherings Act (205 of 1993). While the Act has certain limitations, such as the liability of protest organisers for property damage, it is also often misinterpreted and misapplied by municipal authorities and police officers, leading to arbitrary prohibitions of the constitutional right to protest. For instance, on 11 May 2025, during a South Africa–Malawi soccer match, five men were [arrested](#) outside Loftus Stadium in Pretoria for demanding the exclusion of Israel's sports teams due to Israel's human rights and international humanitarian law violations in Palestine. Despite the peaceful nature of the protest, the five protesters faced charges of public violence, assault with intent to cause grievous bodily harm and malicious damage to property, drawing criticism from [CSOs](#). On 14 May 2025, they were [released](#) on bail and their case was postponed to 18 June 2025 for further investigation.

Freedom of expression has seen mixed developments. The [repeal](#) of criminal defamation through the Judicial Matters Amendment Act (2023) was a positive step. However, journalists and activists continue to face harassment, physical assault, censorship, lawsuits and legal intimidation. The [signing](#) of the General Intelligence Laws Amendment Bill (GILAB) on 28 March 2025 by President Cyril Ramaphosa has sparked concern. While it excludes a clause mandating broad powers to allow the [vetting](#) of any person or institution of national security interest, including private individuals, CSOs, religious groups and commercial enterprises, it still allows for the vetting of individuals accessing "critical infrastructure." This provision could potentially target journalists at the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC), posing serious threats to press freedom and source confidentiality.

2. Supportive Legal Framework for the Work of Civil Society Actors

Article 18 of the South African [Constitution](#) and Article 22 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights ([ICCPR](#)), to which South Africa is a state party, guarantee the right to freedom of association. However, implementation remains a challenge.

CSOs in South Africa must [register](#) under the Non-profit Organisations (NPO) Act of 1997, overseen by the NPO Directorate housed in the Department of Social Development (DSD) in Pretoria, Gauteng Province. While the Directorate offers an online platform for registration, delays in receiving registration certificates and centralised bureaucracy remain significant obstacles, particularly for organisations residing outside Pretoria.

In February 2023, South Africa was [placed](#) on the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) greylist due to shortcomings in its anti-money laundering and counter-terrorism financing (AML/CTF) regime. An Action Plan comprising 22 items was adopted to address eight strategic deficiencies identified by FATF. South Africa is [deemed](#) to have addressed or largely addressed 20 of the 22 action items in its Action Plan, leaving two items to be addressed in the next reporting period that runs from March 2025 to June 2025. This would enable South Africa to be considered for delisting from the FATF greylist in October 2025.

FATF raised a key concern that CSOs might be [used](#) for terrorism financing and money laundering and recommended that South Africa develops a CSO Terror Funding Risk Assessment. A CSO Terror Financing Risk Assessment was conducted and found that the sector has a medium level of exposure. Identified threats include raising funds for foreign terrorist groups, supporting travel for terrorist purposes and using online media for propaganda and recruitment. The DSD, together with the South African Revenue Service (SARS) and the Financial Intelligence Centre (FIC), introduced a system that classifies CSOs as high, medium, or low risk. High-risk organisations are under closer supervision, while deregistration has targeted non-compliant, lower-risk organisations.

On 13 November 2024, the DSD [announced](#) a phased approach to the deregistration of non-compliant CSOs following earlier public statements indicating its plans to enforce compliance more strictly. By February 2025, over 203,000 CSOs were at risk of [deregistration](#) for failing to submit annual reports. By June 2025, the [website](#) of the NPO Directorate indicated that 15,615 organisations were deregistered for non-compliance with reporting requirements under the NPO Act. Many affected organisations lacked the administrative capacity to meet these obligations, threatening their operations and access to funding.

3. Accessible and Sustainable Resources

While South Africa's legal framework allows CSOs to receive both domestic and international funding without formal restrictions, practical barriers to accessing funding have grown significantly over the past year, especially for smaller, local community-based and rights-focused groups.

A key challenge has been the tightened enforcement of [compliance](#) under the NPO Act, driven by the government's efforts to exit the FATF greylist. Although deregistered CSOs can [appeal](#) the decision to an Arbitration Tribunal and regain status, the loss of registration affects their ability to open bank accounts and receive public or donor funding. CSOs with international board members or those awaiting registration often [face](#) delays in opening bank accounts.

The Draft General Laws (Anti-Money Laundering and Combating Terrorism Financing) Amendment Bill [released](#) for public comments in December 2024 by the National Treasury will add further compliance [burdens](#) including requirements to disclose beneficial ownership, the origin and use of funds and conduct detailed risk assessments. If enacted, the bill could exacerbate the vulnerability of small CSOs with

limited administrative capacity. While intended to curb financial crime, the bill may inadvertently restrict access to cross-border funding and narrow civic space.

Furthermore, government departments and both private and public funding agencies have been criticised for opaque and inconsistent processes related to public funding grants. Recent budget cuts and a financial freeze within the Gauteng Department of Social Development have [disrupted](#) support to numerous CSOs, undermining their ability to serve vulnerable communities. CSOs working on lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and intersex issues (LGBTQI+), gender-based violence and femicide (GBV-F), migration, land reform and anti-corruption often rely on international donors, many of whom are now scaling back due to shifting donor priorities and geopolitical tensions. Notably, the global political [tension](#) with the US, triggered by isolationist policies vilifying South Africa's land reform and genocide [case](#) against Israel at the International Court of Justice (ICJ), has affected funding pipelines. USAID's abrupt funding cuts disrupted critical health programmes, especially those focused on HIV prevention, treatment and [healthcare](#) sectors where USAID historically played a major role. Many CSOs that [rely](#) on USAID support to deliver essential services, conduct research and engage in advocacy were forced to scale back operations or shut down programmes entirely.

4. Open and Responsive State

Over the past year, South Africa's relationship between government and civil society has been marked by both cooperation and significant challenges. While formal engagement mechanisms such as public comment on Bills, parliamentary hearings and national task forces exist, their effectiveness and inclusivity remain inconsistent, particularly for grassroots organisations and marginalised groups, including women-led gender justice organisations. In many cases, these groups face barriers such as limited access to information, underrepresentation in decision-making forums and inadequate resourcing, which limit meaningful participation.

The [establishment](#) of the National Council on Gender-Based Violence and Femicide (NCGBFV) on 15 November 2024 includes CSO and government representatives tasked with overseeing the implementation of the National Strategic Plan on Gender Based Violence-Femicide. While the initiative reflects a positive step toward institutional cooperation, [delays](#) in funding and operational roll-out have hindered its effectiveness. As a result, many women-led gender justice organisations remain under-resourced and unable to fully participate in shaping and monitoring the national response to GBV-F.

On the legislative front, CSOs made critical [submissions](#) against the General Intelligence Laws Amendment Bill (GILAB). Over 30 CSOs [objected](#) to the provisions that allow state intelligence agencies' vetting of any person or institution, including CSOs, citing the potential for surveillance and political interference. The strong CSO advocacy led to the [omission](#) of the draconian vetting provision. However, the law still permits the vetting of individuals to access "critical infrastructure", opening the door to surveillance of SABC journalists, undermining freedom of expression. To rectify this, the Bill should have made explicit that SABC journalists must be exempt from the vetting provisions.

Additional tensions arose from the mass deregistration of CSOs under revised anti-money laundering regulations. Many small and rural organisations lacked the

resources to comply, and CSOs [criticised](#) the Department of Social Development for inadequate support and consultation.

Although CSOs engaged in formal consultations on GILAB, many [reported](#) that these processes lacked public awareness and yielded little influence on outcomes. The voices of LGBTQ+ communities, migrants and informal workers were rarely prioritised, reflecting broader concerns about meaningful participation in policymaking.

5. Political Culture and Public Discourses on Civil Society

The South African government's perception of CSOs remains mixed and often contradictory. On one hand, political leaders publicly acknowledge the important role of CSOs in advancing social justice, service delivery and democratic accountability. For instance, at the NGO/CSO Summit in late 2024 and again during Human Rights Month in February 2025, Minister Mmamoloko Kubayi affirmed the [importance](#) that “without CSOs government will not succeed in fulfilling its constitutional mandate.”

However, this recognition is undermined by growing hostility from other government officials. After the 2024 general election, several CSOs raised concerns over the appointment of [impeached](#) former Judge President John Hlophe to the Judicial Service Commission (JSC). In response, some political leaders [accused](#) these CSOs of undermining the “will of the people.” Many CSOs viewed this as an attempt to delegitimise CSO voices and restrict democratic participation.

Media coverage plays a significant role in shaping public perception of CSOs. Mainstream media often positively highlights CSOs' contributions in areas such as anti-corruption, gender-based violence and community mobilisation. [Campaigns](#) such as #JusticeForCwecwe, which responded to the sexual assault of a young girl, gained national traction largely due to strong civil society advocacy. This led to widespread public support, protests and engagement from policymakers.

Fostering a collaborative [relationship](#) between government, media and civil society is essential for strengthening South Africa's democratic resilience. Rather than treating CSOs as adversaries, government officials should recognize them as vital partners in tackling systemic challenges and advancing inclusive development. An enabling environment is one that safeguards civic space, upholds press freedom and values public participation by ensuring that civil society and independent media can continue making meaningful contributions to South Africa's democratic and social progress.

6. Access to a Secure Digital Environment

South Africa's [Constitution](#) guarantees the right to freedom of expression and access to information, both offline and online. In practice, CSOs enjoy relatively open access to digital platforms without widespread internet shutdowns or censorship. However, the digital environment has become increasingly hostile, especially for CSOs working on topics considered sensitive or on critical issues.

Over the past year, CSO actors, particularly those advocating for refugee and migrant rights, LGBTQ+ and anti-corruption, have [reported](#) growing incidents of cyberbullying, harassment, and coordinated disinformation campaigns. LGBTQ+ persons and

activists [experienced](#) spikes in online hate speech and threats, largely due to societal attitudes and prejudices. While South Africa's Constitution guarantees equality and non-discrimination, including based on sexual orientation, in practice stigma remains deeply entrenched toward transgender, non-binary and queer individuals. Activists supporting refugees and migrants are particularly vulnerable with political parties often [fueling](#) xenophobic sentiments online, often aimed at silencing dissent and delegitimising the advocacy work of CSOs and activists who defend the rights of refugees and migrants. Women human rights defenders (WHRDs) remain particular targets of [gendered](#) digital abuse, undermining their participation in civic discourse.

Although South Africa does not impose systematic internet shutdowns, digital surveillance remains a concern. The General Intelligence Laws Amendment Act provisions pose risks to online privacy and press freedom, particularly for SABC journalists, as the public broadcaster is considered "critical infrastructure". This means SABC journalists, especially those in senior roles or covering sensitive investigations, may be legally subjected to intrusive security vetting by state security agencies. Furthermore, the fact that the SABC has [previously](#) confirmed that its Group Executives undergo state security vetting raises concerns that the GILAB's provisions could lead to an expansion of vetting to a broader range of SABC journalists, potentially impacting their independence and freedom. Meanwhile, regulatory gaps mean that digital platforms often fail to respond adequately to online abuse or disinformation, leaving CSOs vulnerable.

Challenges and Opportunities

Civil society in South Africa will face significant challenges in the next four months, particularly due to the government's push to meet Financial Action Task Force (FATF) requirements and exit the FATF greylist. Thousands of CSOs risk deregistration under the NPO Act for non-compliance with administrative and financial obligations, especially small, rural and under-resourced organisations.

Rising political tensions within the GNU may further polarise civic space, especially for organisations working on land rights, migration, LGBTIQ+ rights, and environmental justice.

Despite these threats, key opportunities exist. Platforms such as the National Dialogue, the G20 and C20 which will be hosted in South Africa, provide avenues to elevate public-driven concerns and expand civic participation. Furthermore, these platforms will offer a chance to directly influence policy discussions, build alliances with diverse stakeholders, amplify the voices of marginalised communities, strengthen advocacy strategies and secure commitments from decision-makers that can translate into tangible reforms and resources for the work of CSOs.

To address current challenges and unlock opportunities, civil society requires sustained access to flexible core funding and stronger protection for fundamental freedoms. This includes advancing legal frameworks such as the Whistleblower Protection Bill and adopting a model law to safeguard HRDs. Inclusive and transparent policymaking processes are essential, along with continued collaboration between CSOs, independent media, independent judiciary and oversight institutions. Such partnerships are critical to protecting and expanding civic space.

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